

ARTICLE APPEARED  
ON PAGE A-12

NEW YORK TIMES  
17 October 1983

# Journalists Debate Guild's Endorsement

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The Newspaper Guild's endorsement of Walter F. Mondale's Presidential aspirations has raised anew the issue of whether journalists lose credibility if they and their organizations take partisan political positions.

Charles A. Perlik Jr., president of the guild, whose 31,000 members include reporters, editors and photographers involved in the coverage of Presidential campaigns, said some members were worried that the union's vote would call journalistic impartiality into question.

But he said the majority of the guild's executive board and probably most of the membership believed that "we should not surrender our right to speak out on issues of such consequence."

Mr. Perlik cast the union's vote for Mr. Mondale, who is seeking the Democratic nomination for President, at the general board meeting in Hollywood, Fla., of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations on Oct. 5, when the labor federation voted to endorse the former Vice President.

Although reporters, editors, photographers and other newsroom personnel make up only 45 percent of the guild's membership — the others are commercial employees, such as advertising or circulation workers — the organization is widely perceived to be a union of newsroom people.

## Erosion of Credibility Seen

Charles W. Bailey, a former editor of The Minneapolis Star and Tribune, who is conducting a study of ethical problems in journalism, said: "I don't think a labor organization of newspeople ought to be in politics. It further erodes the credibility of the craft."

But George F. Will, a political columnist for The Washington Post and Newsweek magazine, said the guild's

endorsement "raises no issue that any other collective endorsement does not pose."

He maintained that it would no more affect a journalist's evenhandedness in writing about a politician whom his union had endorsed than it would affect a plumber's fairness in fixing the plumbing at the home of politician whom his union had opposed.

Many reporters and editors, even those not directly involved in governmental coverage, say that to avoid the actuality or the appearance of a conflict of interest, they shun virtually any political activity except voting.

Ethics codes promulgated by news organizations generally contain passages such as the following, from the code of the Associated Press Managing Editors Association: "Involvement in such things as politics, community affairs, demonstrations and social causes that could cause a conflict of interest or the appearance of a conflict should be avoided."

Seymour Topping, the managing editor of The New York Times, said the newspaper's policy was, "Members of the staff should not become involved in political activity of a nature that would prejudice their independent status as reporters and editors."

## Editorial Endorsements Routine

The rules of suggested conduct for individual journalists, however, do not always control the behavior of the groups to which they belong or the organizations for whom they work.

Newspapers routinely endorse political candidates in editorials, and radio and television stations often take stands on public issues. They say the public understands that the editorial positions do not affect the evenhandedness of the coverage in the news columns.

The guild's stands on governmental affairs have created internal contro-

versy in the past.

In 1967, editorial members led a successful fight to stop the guild from taking money from foundations that they believed were financed by the Central Intelligence Agency. They contended that a union representing journalists should not have any ties to the Government about which they reported.

## McGovern Endorsement Disputed

There was another internal dispute in 1972, when the guild endorsed George McGovern's Presidential candidacy. Mr. Bailey noted that that action was taken in the context of hostility between the Nixon Administration and the press, epitomized by Vice President Agnew's attack on reporters as "the nattering nabobs of negativism."

The guild did not endorse any candidates in the 1976 and 1980 Presidential campaigns.

Mr. Perlik said nine of the 16 executive board members had approved the guild's participation in the A.F.L.-C.I.O.'s endorsement process, and noted that the vote was not a unilateral action by the guild to support Mr. Mondale.

## Less Confidence in the Press

A number of recent surveys have found that public confidence in the press is declining and that most people believe that the national press is more politically liberal than the public it serves.

Lou Cannon, who covers the White House for The Washington Post, said he opposed the guild's endorsement of Mr. McGovern in 1972. "I didn't think it was a good idea then and I don't think it is a good idea now," he said.

"Those of us in the news business should do what we say others should do" to avoid conflicts of interest, he added, contending that, for many readers, the guild's action will "ratify the conspiracy theory that Spiro Agnew and his gang put forward."